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Intersections of Religion and War: Examining a USCC Diary

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Intersections of Religion and War: Examining a USCC Diary

Abstract

While most don't immediately associate religion with war, there is no doubt that it plays a role in most, the Civil War included. The Civil War brought with it new levels of death and destruction that the government was unprepared to deal with; it didn't have the resources to adequately care for the influx of wounded soldiers, which was painfully evident after Bull Run when the number of soldiers needing medical care was more than the hospitals could handle. In the wake of the Battle of First Bull Run, the general public as well as the government saw the need for a civilian organization to help care for and comfort wounded soldiers. On November 14, 1861, a few months after the battle, the United States Christian Commission (USCC) was created by representatives of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to fill this void. Its headquarters were set up in Philadelphia, and a layman named George Hay Stuart was appointed to head the Commission. The Commission was made up of volunteer delegates who were unpaid, though they were reimbursed for travel costs and other expenses they acquired while in the field. These delegates would go to the field for usually only a few months, during which time they were encouraged to keep a diary; many did just that.

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Intersections of Religion and War: Examining a USCC Diary

By Savannah Labbe '19

While most don't immediately associate religion with war, there is no doubt that it plays a role in most, the Civil War included. The Civil War brought with it new levels of death and destruction that the government was unprepared to deal with; it didn't have the resources to adequately care for the influx of wounded soldiers, which was painfully evident after Bull Run when the number of soldiers needing medical care was more than the hospitals could handle. In the wake of the Battle of First Bull Run, the general public as well as the government saw the need for a civilian organization to help care for and comfort wounded soldiers. On November 14, 1861, a few months after the battle, the United States Christian Commission (USCC) was created by representatives of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to fill this void. Its headquarters were set up in Philadelphia, and a layman named George Hay Stuart was appointed to head the Commission. The Commission was made up of volunteer delegates who were unpaid, though they were reimbursed for travel costs and other expenses they acquired while in the field. These delegates would go to the field for usually only a few months, during which time they were encouraged to keep a diary; many did just that.



USCC headquarters in Germantown, VA. Photo via Library of Congress.

A diary from a delegate that spent a few months in Louisville gives us a glimpse into his everyday life. The diary was issued by the USCC and bears their stamp on the front; the first few pages detail the duties of a delegate and provide other useful information and instructions. A delegate was expected to visit hospitals, camps, and battlefields to distribute supplies and religious materials. He was also supposed to speak to the men individually as well as collectively and hold meetings of prayer. In addition, the Commission provided the delegates with supplies such as stamps, envelopes, paper, clothing, food, and coffee for distribution to the soldiers.

After the instructions section the delegate's diary entries begin. The entries in the journal I examined date from May 18, 1864 to July 7, 1864. He was in the field for a couple of months, which is reflective of the typical length of time the Commission preferred for its volunteers. In his diary the delegate recorded the smallest details about his life such as the weather conditions and his bathing habits. In addition to this, the reader also learns what duties the delegate performed on a day-to-day basis. Much of what the delegate wrote about involved talking to the men, visiting the hospital, and distributing religious tracts. For example, on May 24 he wrote that he distributed 200 religious tracts and would have distributed more if he had the resources to do so.

In addition to handing out religious tracts, the delegate also performed many other essential tasks. There are accounts of the delegate distributing woolen shirts and cotton drawers to the men as well as envelopes, paper, and stamps. At one point he described helping a wounded soldier write home, a simple task that provided the soldier with the precious ability to communicate with his loved ones. There are other instances in the diary in which the reader can imagine the impact the delegate would have had on the soldiers. In the June 22 and 23 entries he wrote about visiting Rebel prisoners. During this visit one prisoner in particular caught his attention; a Confederate, Holliday, who was wounded and paralyzed. The delegate provided him with a shirt, despite the fact that he was a Confederate. On the 23, he wrote of the death of Holliday and lamented at “what a penalty this nation is paying for its oppressive acts.” In addition to this, the delegate spent a lot of time in the field and in the hospital, comforting and attending to the wounded. For example, on June 19 he wrote that he “prayed with a man wounded in the bowels. He died in an hour.” In this way the delegate was able to do something of which the government and the hospital staff were incapable of: sitting with and comforting a dying soldier.

In this diary we see examples of the many services the USCC provided. These services brought comfort to the soldiers and filled a void that the government was incapable of filling. The earliest forms of dog tags were provided by the Commission, something that the government was unable to do. The USCC’s distribution of religious tracts, if nothing else, provided the men with reading material that was often seriously lacking or even nonexistent in most army camps. In addition, they provided much needed support to hospitals and distributed supplies that the men needed but that the government couldn’t supply. The USCC did many other things like this, and while some may have had an aversion to the religious nature of the organization, there is no question that they provided the soldiers with simple pleasures and comforts in a time of war to which they would not have had access otherwise.

Sources

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